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Research with Children in Kindergartens

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Abstract

This paper starts from contemporary conceptualizations of childhood as socially constructed and structured, and contemporary conceptualizations of children as active participants in the construction and determination of their own lives, or, as capable of independent action. These considerations imply a shift in childhood and children research approaches, and there is much discussion about the interpretative approach to research, i.e. research with children. This paper provides an example of a research about children's view of decision-making in a kindergarten, exemplifying the possibilities of research with children.

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1. Introduction

Children growing up in institutional context is one of the main characteristics of contemporary childhood, and this has actualized the question of children's social positioning in that context, or, more specifically, their activity in their own development. There is a contradiction between children's reality, in terms of institutionalization, characterized by adults' regulation of childhood and children, and contemporary theoretical considerations of childhood and children, in terms of their activity, competence and ability.

This is why this paper provides a review of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, the interpretative approach to research and provides an example of a research with children about children's view of participation, exemplified by decision-making in kindergarten.

2. Contemporary conceptualizations of children and childhood

A critical approach towards "traditional academic disciplines" within social sciences [1] encompasses an abandonment of the dominant traditional view of childhood and children as inferior to adulthood and adults and

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advocacy of viewing childhood and children as a conceptual category and social position. In relation to research, this implies an abandonment of the hitherto prevailing marginalized position of childhood and children [2].

Contemporary conceptualizations – “new paradigms” of childhood and children emphasize social construction and structuring of childhood. The reviewed literature advocates an interdisciplinary approach (sociology, psychology, pedagogy, cultural anthropology...) to contemporary children and childhood study in theory and practice.

Social construction of childhood as a theoretical approach, according to its proponents [3, 4, 5] implies viewing the variability of conceptualizations and experiences of childhood. Along with the stated variability of childhood, authors also emphasize continuity of childhood. In relation to social structuring of childhood, according to Qvortrup [6, 7], this means that childhood is a socially structured space, which is permanently present in the structure of societies, whose construction changes in accordance with historical and cultural characteristics of society.

Due to conceptualizing childhood as socially constructed, questions arise about the nature of children – who are children, how are they conceptualized? Prout and James [8] state that children are active participants in the “construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.” This can also be considered using the term “agency”, in the sense of a child’s personal activity and ability to act independently [9]. While research of social structuring emphasize the common characteristics of childhood and social life, agency emphasizes the diversity of individual childhoods – recognizing children as social participants, their competency etc. [4]. Bayanova [10], in the context of institutional social rules and the “normative” culture emphasizes that children, as subjects of culture, see normative situations differently than adults. Corsaro [11] further supplements contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children with the notion of interpretative reproduction, in the sense of the children’s contribution to society, as active interpreters and participants in the social world, who adjust information from the adult world and use it in a creative and interpretative process. If our starting point is social construction of childhood and if children are considered as capable of making independent decisions, then it is necessary to think of them as “beings and becomings” [12].

In sum, in contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, children are as social actors with the ability to control the direction of their own lives. These conceptualizations differ from “traditional” conceptualizations of childhood and children, in which childhood is a phase on the way to adulthood and children are immature, vulnerable, incapable beings, who need guidance. Childhood and children are considered in accordance with broader historical-cultural-social changes. From this view of childhood and children, a new view of what it means to research childhoods and children emerged.

In the context of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children one of the current questions is how to research childhood and children. If we state that we do research in the function of quality of children’s lives, then this implies a shift in the approach to research of the social world. Instead of the dominant view of children as research objects, proponents of children’s agency, using experiences from ethnographic research, advocate for research within the interpretative approach to research.

3. Research with children

Contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children introduce the interdisciplinary approach to their research methodology as well. The interpretative approach to research is gaining prominence, and it implies “research *with* children, rather than, *on* children” [13]. In research with children, the main purpose is to understand a child’s life from his/her perspective. Therefore, the child is a research subject, or source of information about himself/herself and his/her life. Sommer [14] confirms this when he writes about the importance of researching children’s perspectives about their own lives.

As it is already noted, research with children have a broader framework, which can be placed within the qualitative, “naturalistic”, “phenomenological” or “interpretative” approach to research, which accepts the existence of multiple realities, alternative interpretations and negotiation [15]. These approaches emphasize the importance of the personal perspectives we research and try to understand “from inside-out”. Advocators of the

interpretative approach claim this kind of research enables an insight into the ways children are seen, what is important to them, ways they conceptualize the world around them and ways children position themselves in that world [11, 13, 16].

Grover [17] determines children's participation in research more specifically. She emphasizes that in research with children, children participate both as examinees and as "researchers" in all parts of the research process, e.g. in forming or suggesting the research problem or in shaping data interpretations.

The theory of the interpretative approach states its advantages. Proponents [11, 13, 16] think the basic contribution of research with children is recognizing the influence of the social structure on childhood and children, but also the recognition that within these social structures, children exhibit agency, i. e. "make self-conscious decisions and choices as independent social actors", not determined solely by social structure [4].

However, there are discussions about the particularities manifested in specific methodological and ethical issues related to research with children [13]. One of the more significant questions within the interpretative approach is the possibility of conducting research with children, i.e. resolving the question of the relation between "traditional" approaches and "new" approaches. Can we speak of an abandonment of the traditional approaches, or of the existence of traditional and new approaches side by side, and together? In other words, what is the relation between research problem and purposes and traditional and new approaches to research, and when and under which conditions can we apply them?

If we place the stated considerations in an institutional context, exemplified by a kindergarten, we can question the possibility of applying the interpretative approach to research, especially regarding the relation between preschool professionals (preschool teacher, pedagogue, principal) and children. For example, Punch [18] claims that in research with children there are problems that stem from "the position of childhood in adult society, adults' attitudes towards children and the children themselves". In other words, in relation to kindergarten, we can state that preschool professionals are not able to distance themselves from their preconceived theories about children and kindergarten, which makes it difficult for them to see children as subjects in the kindergarten and in research.

Christensen, Prout [19], James [20] and Punch [18] assume that research with children includes a construction of a rapport between children and preschool professionals, and if we take the researcher into consideration, than this means a rapport between the researcher, preschool professionals and children. Furthermore, they question the authenticity in the relation between adults and children and warn about adults' imposition of perceptions onto children. In other words, they question the possibility of conducting research in a context in which there are power relations. Power relations manifest themselves, for example, in the use of language; research instrument, in the sense of reliability and validity and the selected context and research environment.

As a doctoral student in the area of contemporary childhood, I deal with researching children's agency and participation in kindergartens. Because of this, I am especially interested in the possibility of applying the interpretative approach, in which children are reliable narrators about their own life. In the remaining part of the paper, I present an example of research with children in which I participated as one of the researchers.

4. Example of a research with children

In the remaining part of the paper, I present an example of a research with children I conducted with an M. A. pedagogy student as part of her diploma paper. The theoretical frame of the research are contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, and the corresponding interpretative approach to research with children.

4.1. Aim, sample and research methods

The aim of the research was to gain insight into children's view of participation in kindergarten, exemplified by children's decision-making in kindergarten. The research was conducted on an intentional sample of 20 children who attend kindergarten, aged from 5 years and 6 months to 6 years and 5 months. To gather data, a

semi-structured interview protocol was used. The protocol was constructed based on the protocol Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson [21] used in their research on children's conceptions of decision-making. Children's participation in the kindergarten presupposes children's decision-making (choosing, influencing) and possibility of children's participation (engagement in activities – performance, (self)evaluation of activities).

During the preliminary research, we verified possibilities of applying the constructed instrument, but also the possibilities of conducting research with children. It is important to note that both researchers have experience in working with children and that the children in the interviewed group were familiar with the researchers. One researcher interviewed the children, and the other one made notes about the interview.

We interviewed children in pairs (the choice of pairs was free), without the presence of the preschool teacher. Overall, 10 pairs of children were interviewed. The children were interviewed in the common room, so there was no noise or other people entering, which could disturb the research process. All the interviews were audio-taped, and then transcribed to paper. Two independent researchers initially and axially coded the gathered data, using "grounded theory" methodology. The unit of analysis was a meaningful unit, i.e. a child's answer of at least one sentence or more sentences. We analysed these sentences and determined dominant meanings of the answers.

4.2. Results and discussion

The answers about children's view of their own decision-making in the kindergarten were categorized into four groups. The first group contains answers in which children determine their decision-making functionally, in the sense of choice and participation, with or without examples (*"Here I can decide to play by myself."*). The second group comprises of answers in which children determine their decision-making functionally, in the sense of choice and participation with examples (*"Games! I can decide games; I can decide what we are going to play... I can decide what kinds of sports we are going to play..."*). The third group is made up of answers containing only examples (*"I can, I can decide when someone is smaller than me, then I can decide for him"*), and fourth group consists of incomplete answers (*"I don't know."*) [22].

Most answers point to children's decision-making being related to play, in the sense of selecting play as an activity, and choosing what to play, with whom, with what and when [22]. This finding is similar to a research conducted by Einarsdóttir [23]. She also concludes that children mostly decide about play – choosing the type of play and place of playing. Despite children's decision-making in kindergarten being related only to play, it is visible from children's answers that the final decision about will they play, what, with whom, with what and when is made by the preschool teacher, which is another similarity to previous research results. Specifically, Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson [21] concluded that children have limited possibilities of decision-making in kindergarten, and that they primarily decide on self-initiated activities and play, and rarely about the organization, routines, contents and teacher-initiated activities. Einarsdóttir [23] confirms this conclusion and states that the research results she obtained indicate that children can decide in the kindergarten, but with certain limitations, i.e. adults make final decisions and have control.

When we asked who is in charge in the kindergarten, all the children who were interviewed stated that the preschool teacher was in charge. They elaborated their answers stating that the preschool teacher was *"...bigger than..."* them, that they are *"...younger than her..."* and indicating their social position in the kindergarten (*"...preschool teachers decide..."*, *"This is the preschool teacher's kindergarten, not ours."*, *"When they look after us, children are safe and everything is under control."*) [22]. The children claim that they will be in charge when they *"...grow up..."*, which indicates a problem concerning generational social structuring of relations in the kindergarten. Age being the key factor of child-adult differentiation legitimizes the superiority of adult authority over children [24]. This is also confirmed by children's answers to a question concerning what they do when they decide something, and their preschool teacher interrupts them. They all answered that they stop whatever they were doing and *"...obey their preschool teacher."* [22].

When asked where they can decide more, at home or in the kindergarten, all the participants said they can decide more at home. These results relate to explanation of social rules children adopt in institutions stated by Bayanova [10] and children's awareness of the importance of social appropriateness of their behaviour.

We classified answers to what decision-making is into three categories: decision-making as independent choice and action (“*When you think of something yourself and then do it.*”), answers in which children point to positions in terms of external regulation (“*...when the adult says what can be and what should be done.*”) and answers in which they provide examples of decision-making, in which there is a visible emphasis on the importance of age (“*...you decide when you’re 4, not when you’re 3.*”). It is noticeable that children’s conceptualizations of decision-making could be placed on a continuum – from autonomous choice to external regulation, which indirectly points to generational social structuring within the kindergarten.

The research results indicate that in kindergarten children decide solely about play (will they play, what, with whom, with what, when). It is possible to question whether even this is “autonomous decision-making” if we take into consideration the spatial-temporal and material structuring of kindergartens. The results also indicate that children are aware of the asymmetrical relations between them and adults in institutional contexts, i.e. their inferior position in relation to adults.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children emphasize social construction and structuring of childhood. Social construction as a theoretical approach that entails viewing variability of childhood conceptualizations and experiences. Social structuring implies childhood is a socially structured space, permanently present in the structure of societies, whose construction changes in accordance with historical and cultural characteristics of society. The interdisciplinary approach of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children is also visible in its research methodology. An interpretative approach to research, i.e. research with children are advocated. In research with children, the main purpose is to understand a child’s life from his/her perspective. The child is a research subject or source of information about himself/herself and his/her own life.

The example of a research with children about children’s decision-making in kindergartens indicates that in the specific kindergarten children decide only about play (will they play, what, with whom, with what, when). It is also evident that children are aware of the asymmetrical relations between them and adults in institutional contexts. This research attempt showed that children are reliable informants about their own lives and that by applying the interpretative approach to research it is possible to gain greater insight into children’s lives in institutional contexts from their own perspective.

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